

Century Safe Chicago
An essay by Jessica Cochran

Century Safe is curated by the graduate Curatorial Practice class, Spring Semester, 2016, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Led by Jessica Cochran.

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In March 2016, a headline on the travel website Atlas Obscura read “Excited Town Unearths Time Capsule Full Of Garbage...

This is not a good commercial for Ziploc," one onlooker said.”

Simply an exhibition of artworks that interpret our present, *Century Safe Chicago*, takes as its inspiration one of our culture’s most humble, futile and, sometimes, wonderfully surprising collective assertions of social memory: the time capsule. While most time capsules are grass roots—the activity of a 6th grade classroom, for example—we decided to name ours after the world’s first intentional, scheduled time capsule, the Century Safe, which debuted at the Philadelphia World’s Fair exactly 140 years ago. Lined in purple velvet with a glass inner door, the capsule featured guest books, objects, autographs and photographs of military and political luminaries. Like this “first” time capsule, how are exhibitions, particularly those situated in alternative or small-scale cultural spaces—and all of which have afterlives through things like catalogs, websites, postcards and labels—important as idiosyncratic stewards of social memory?

While putting this exhibition together within the context of a graduate course, the students and I collectively researched artists for inclusion, focusing on those who map, archive or trace the everyday. Or, as we began to put it, (using a term borrowed from curatorial theorist and historian Terry Smith) we sought artists who “access contemporaneity.” We completed our curatorial research while engaging in readings about curatorial and artistic models—texts covering everything from Enlightenment-era cabinets of curiosity to the joyfully subversive *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures (1972)* by Marcel Broodthaers; the present day Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles and the Museum of Everyday Life in Vermont; and also time capsules created by artists like Andy Warhol, Dieter Roth and David Wojnarowicz.

We thought about the physical characteristics of Roman Susan itself—which seems like something of a funky display container or diorama when viewed from the street—and the storefront’s own commercial history as a 1-800 Got Junk Office.

We debated really attempting to create an *actual* time capsule and ultimately decided to commission a quasi-functional piece of archival furniture by John Preus. Why be handcuffed to the practical realities of storing a capsule of art? Instead, we hoped to create a speculative space to invite deeper reflection on the materiality or archive-ability of the art objects on view and “playful negotiation,”ⁱⁱ (a term borrowed from curator Ralph Rugoff) as to how the meanings of these artworks together create noise in the gallery. And how will these “noisy” meanings migrate forward to an unknown audience of the future? As Abby Smith Rumsey wrote recently in *When We Are No More*, “Human memory is unique because with the information stored in our brains we can summon not only things that did or do exist, but also things that might exist.” And so, “from the contents of our past we can generate things from the future.”ⁱⁱⁱ So too it seems that as our brains do with information, artworks store ideas, summon the past and, most interestingly, generate possible futures. All that said, we just don’t know how a person in 2095 might encounter, say, one of Miller & Shellabarger’s *Butter Books*, a codex binding of a year’s worth of butter wrappers. But it’s fun to think about.

At the School of the Art Institute, there are many great precedents for curatorial work that is driven by pedagogy, collective authorship and experimentation. Artist and professor Joseph Grigely and his students, for example, curated artists over the course of one year into an everyday, fluorescent-lit, carpeted classroom space in the MacLean building on our campus. He wrote of this exhibition-in-twelve parts: “For MacLean, we did not have a preconceived notion of how the relationships between works would manifest themselves, or how they might inform each other, as well as the space of 705; for art both conditions, and is conditioned by, the space in which it is shown, as well as the work it is shown with ... only with time did an understanding of the individual works, and their relationships with each other unfold.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And so over the last three months, and the last several weeks especially, my students and I have joyfully encountered the relationships and unexpected connections across works that we collectively (and rather quickly) assembled: Erin Washington’s chalkboard and its history of written “yeses” and “no’s” leans copacetically against John Preus’ set of drawers made from both teacher and student desks salvaged from Chicago Public

Schools. In turn, both of these objects are mutually conditioned by Leonardo Selvaggio's URME Polygons: these are printed busts of historical figures onto which he inserted his face using open source technology and digitally accessible museum collections. Each in their own way, these projects have to do with power, access, privilege and pedagogy in classrooms, collections and in the artist's studio space.

The exhibition also fosters many ways of looking at time and space at a specific moment: Ben Grosser's computational surveillance system "Tracing You" is a website that sees the world from its visitors' viewpoints by matching their IP addresses to online image data sources of locations nearby. Such a mechanical depiction of time and space invites us to wander back across the gallery to revisit Risa Recio's hand annotated maps of future swims in Chicago and her home city of Tacloban in the Philippines... or to look again at Ryan Thompson's drawings of night skies as they would have appeared at the moment of a predicted apocalypse. And for a poetic body of work that draws on the melancholy, mundane and melodramatic nature of social media, Nate Larsen and Marni Shindelman create mysterious, evocative photographs of places coupled with the publically available text of Tweets made nearby.

These are just a few of the connections that we have discovered through the process of collaboratively bringing together and installing works at Roman Susan.

As our curatorial statement asserts, "If capsules are judged for their capacity to interpret a past for an unknown future, we hope our collectively curated exhibition explores meaning and invites reflection in relation to the activities of organizing, preserving and presenting knowledge through objects from a specific time." So, is this exhibition, like any old capsule, a perfect representation of our moment? We are so happy that its not! Because, as a collection of artworks that have generated so much meaning simply by being placed in the same small room by a handful of curators, it is so much more.

I would like to thank the students, my co-curators, for their humor, curiosity and open-mindedness. We would like to thank the artists, for their generosity in time and trust.

-Jessica Cochran

ⁱ Rugoff, Ralph. "Beyond Belief: The Museum as Metaphor" in *Wrapper 40* (Richmond: William K Stout Publisher), 102.

ⁱⁱ Rumsey, Abby Smith, "Memory on Display and Imagination: Memory in Future Tense" in *When We Are No More: How Digital Memory is Shaping our Future* (New York: Bloomsbury Press) 2016. p. 62

ⁱⁱⁱ Grigely, Joseph, ed., *MacLean 705* (London: Bedford Press), 2015. Published in association with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. p. 13